Sophie Craig
University of Maine/Orono
LD 1533

Hello Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and other members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee – thank you for the opportunity to speak this morning. My name is Sophie Craig and I work at the University of Maine as a graduate research assistant; I'm a PhD candidate in my fourth year in the Graduate School of Biomedical Science and Engineering at the University of Maine, and I work in the Department of Molecular and Biomedical sciences. I'm here today to testify in support of LD1533, an act to ensure the retention of R1 research institution status by the University of Maine. I study a virus and how it infects different types of cells. I love my research and I'm one of many graduate workers at UMaine contributing to the research that makes the University an R1 research institution.

R1 status classifies the university as a doctoral university conducting the highest tier of research activity, and UMaine's R1 status has increased the prestige and recognition of the University on the national research level. UMaine's ability to reach and retain R1 status is intrinsic to UMaine's financial wellbeing, the economic contributions of the University to the state of Maine, and the quality of education and training provided to UMaine students.

R1 status is directly dependent on two things: the amount of money spent on research each year, as well as the amount of PhD students graduated each year. UMaine meets the first qualification with no problem, but teeters on the edge of graduating an adequate number of PhD students.

I'm sure you all are not strangers to the financial difficulties that the system is facing.

Graduate workers across the UMaine system have recently unionized to be able to negotiate our working conditions in an academic system that is constantly making financial cuts that fall on the backs of graduate students.

Over the last few years, the University system has limited the ability of departments to fund graduate students – there have been cuts to teaching assistantships, reducing the amount of graduate TA positions in many departments.

Reducing TA positions effectively reduces the amount of graduate students that each department can support. This limits the amount of PhD students that the University will graduate each year, and puts our status as an R1 research institution in jeopardy.

Now, as research funding is threatened from multiple angles on a federal level, funding for graduate students has become even more tenuous. Many graduate students in our department are funded by NIH grants. With fewer TA ships and uncertainty surrounding federal funding, graduate student recruitment is already suffering.

If graduate students are not recruited and retained, the University will lose R1 status. Without the work done by graduate students, new research funding cannot be secured, and the grant funding that supports the system in so many ways will dwindle.

Graduate workers are asking for improvements to our working conditions, and the University needs a way to deliver these improvements that does not fall on the backs of our departments and our labs, which are already struggling to provide the best learning environment for students with limited resources. With cuts to federal research funding and to teaching assistantships, we hope that the designated funding for graduate students proposed in LD1533 will protect UMaine's R1 status.

UMaine's R1 status draws intellectual and economic resources to the University and, in turn, to the state as a whole. Funding and adequately supporting graduate students is key to maintaining the health of the University of Maine system as an education and research institution in the face of current challenges.